



Peter Campus, *Three Transitions*, 1973.

Video Art: What's TV Got To Do With It?

KATHY RAE HUFFMAN

American public television took an expansive leap into the creative realm of the artist in 1964, just one year after John F. Kennedy's death. The presidential assassination was the first television spectacle in history, and brought widespread attention to the overwhelming cultural influence of the broadcast medium by uniting the American public in shared emotion. From this point on, the "media event" became a cultural phenomenon of enormous power, frequently preempting regularly scheduled programming. Up until that time television, a postwar commercial venture of radio broadcasting networks, had been slow to bring in the vast profits anticipated by its developers in the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, television was not considered financially successful until the early 1960s, by which time the medium had become a staple of American entertainment and consciousness.

During this era, a time of political unrest in the nation but of rapid expansion in the noncommercial broadcast industry, a growing number of educational and cable television stations began to challenge commercial network autonomy.¹ Dedicated educational television broadcasters developed important political strategies to finance their activities; unlike the networks they did not have access to commercial resources. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), was established by Congress in 1967 to provide federal funding for "a new and fundamental institution in American culture," and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was formed in 1969.² The development of artists' access to television also begins at about the same time, simultaneous to availability of the first portable video equipment. In fact, technical developments helped to create an experimental impetus, a curiosity and creative approach to the production of programming among a few public TV broadcasters. Until the 1960s, most programs produced by television were still "live" and could be considered "experimental" by today's standards. The medium was new, rapid technical advances offered fresh challenges and capabilities daily, and most TV studio crew members learned their trade on the job. But because of broadcast television's emphasis as a major form of entertainment and its commercial mass media enterprise, it was not a medium considered an appropriate forum for "art."

Using the new technology to full advantage was Boston's public television station WGBH, which went on to play a decisive role in video art over the

next two decades. Fred Barzyk, a young producer who took a bold approach to programming and production, is credited with encouraging cameramen and technicians to experiment with the medium, and in doing so produced some of the most interesting and innovative programs seen on television.³ On air from 1964 to 1966, the first "art" to enter weekly broadcasts was *Jazz Imager*. This unique music program brought top jazz artists into the studio to play while the WGBH production crew improvised along with them, flipping switches to try something new. As WGBH staffer David Atwood recalled this experience, "There was a climate of experimentation . . . and nobody said stop . . . I never looked at myself as a director, I looked at myself as a real artist, helping in the process."⁴

Three years later, in 1967, Barzyk and his station associates produced another, more controversial television series, "What's Happening, Mr. Silver?", which was hosted by Tufts University professor David Silver. The program was an outrageous weekly broadcast that presented a random mix of live and prerecorded video images, bombarding the home audience with a visual representation of the shifting moral attitudes of the times. "We wanted to experiment with every possible aspect of the medium," Barzyk explained, "and intimate behavior in the form of nudity became one factor. We tried to create new problems in the broadcast system so that we could break down the system as it existed."⁵ Barzyk's influence set the tempo for artists to work in the television model, a style that WGBH would continue to encourage and endorse in its programming.

Boston in the 1960s was an active center of experimental art forms. The Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) attracted an international group of artists who were attempting to combine their conceptual interests with the advanced technical research in computers, electronics, and robotics being conducted there.⁶ When the first official artists-in-residence program was established at WGBH in 1967, with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation, several CAVS artists participated. By 1969 they, and others, had produced a significant body of videotapes. Ron Hays, John Cage, Peter Campus, Otto Piene, Alan Kaprow, and William Wegman were among artists who became familiar names around the station. Fred Barzyk formatted the work of this first group of video artists as a half-hour television special, "The Medium Is the Medium." This first television anthology of videoart, and its broadcast, set the stage and became a model for future artists' experiments with television.

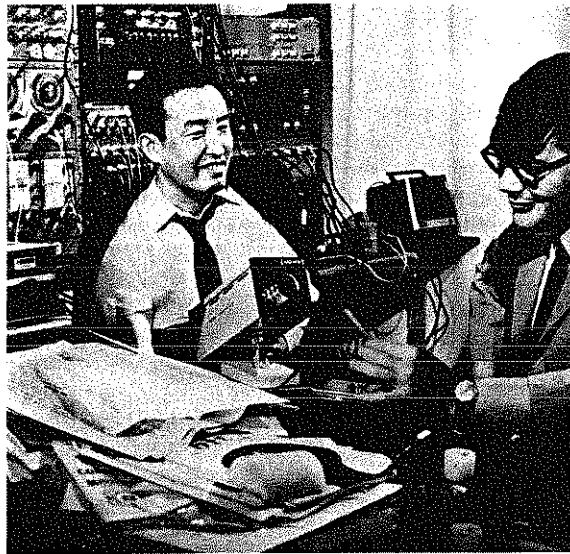
On the West Coast, San Francisco's public television station KQED became the focus of research and experimentation. The Bay Area was a haven for the sixties counterculture, and KQED achieved a reputation for liberal programming policy. In 1967, the station became the home of the Center for Experiments in Television, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation as a kind of re-

search and development arm for the TV industry where artists would find new ways to use the medium. The center operated under the direction of Brice Howard, the former executive producer of cultural programming at WNET, New York's public television station. Associated with radical San Francisco aesthetics, Howard was not interested in developing "product" for television and proclaimed that neither the Rockefeller Foundation nor KQED should expect to see any tangible results from the program.⁷ Renamed the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET) in 1969, when its funding was renewed by the newly formed National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and CPB, this unusual artists-in-residence program brought visual artists, designers, painters, sculptors, musicians, and dancers together with technicians and engineers. The center encouraged broad innovation in technology and design, sponsoring artists such as Stephen Beck, who developed his Direct Video Synthesizer while a regular participant of KQED's experimental studio facility.

Rather than create straightforward television "programs," the artists at NCET emphasized abstract, synthesized, mystical-looking images that demonstrated state-of-the-art analog technology and bewildered many viewers. When broadcast on KQED, these creations were derided as "wallpaper" by critics. The term soon became generic, used not only in reference to all works relying on colorized feedback techniques, but to describe any work in which technology dominated content. KQED broadcast one of the innovative works produced at NCET, William Gwin's *Point Lobos State Reserve*, in 1973. Although the images were of actual scenes recorded on location, Gwin's broadcast looked startlingly different from other programs on TV. In an attempt to mediate this imagery, a voice-over soothingly offered advice to "see your television set as a painting that moves. . . ." A victim of the changing attitudes and ambitions and of its members, NCET closed in 1974. Although it disbanded, its participants continued to work in alternative media, and established a center for art education and an artists workshop at the University of California, Berkeley, headed up by NCET's William Rosenquist.⁸

The 1970s: The Myth Explodes and the Era of Conflict Begins

Throughout the 1970s, Boston continued to be an active center for artists working with television. Multi-media artist Nam June Paik, for one, frequently commuted between New York and Boston, building a sizeable reputation with his avant-garde Fluxus events.⁹ An experimental musician, he incorporated electronic technology and television imagery into performance pieces. In 1970 he worked closely with WGBH producers and with artists at MIT's CAVS to build a futurist environment. Having become the official advisor to Howard Klein at the Rockefeller Foundation in 1973, Paik was instrumental in fostering the Foundation's commitment to the media arts for two decades.



Nam June Paik and producer Fred Barzyk at the WGBH Project for New Television in Boston, 1970.

With Rockefeller funding, Paik began to collaborate with engineers at WGBH, where he introduced his own real-time television mixing console, which he built in collaboration with artist-engineer Shuye Abe. A one-man unit, Paik's video synthesizer generated hours of shifting luminescent abstractions during its maiden telecast. Paik called it "an electronic watercolor set for everybody to see."¹⁰ The legendary broadcast was entitled *Video Commune—The Beatles from Beginning to End*, and typified the kind of freedom and commitment to experimentation that public television encouraged, thanks to generous funding, during the 1970s. The celebrated work of Paik and others contributed to an illusion of freer access for video artists and greater support from public television than was actually available. In reality, the surge in video art was due to the intense motivation of a few individuals who worked from within the system to expand it.

Boston audiences continued to see experimental broadcasts in 1972. WGBH producers organized *The Very First On-The-Air Half-Inch Videotape Festival Ever*, where artists were invited to provide their videotapes, made on reel-to-reel porta-paks, for what became a marathon four-hour special broadcast. The event helped convince funders and station management that the future for video was strong. In the same year, the Music Image Workshop was created by Ron Hays, who used the Paik-Abe Synthesizer to create abstract images that were mixed with regular broadcasts of the Boston Symphony Orches-

tra. In 1974, the WGBH New Television Workshop was officially founded. Under the direction of Fred Barzyk, it was the first such television-sponsored workshop to offer artists the use of its half-inch non-broadcast quality porta-paks, and to encourage them to take an interdisciplinary approach to video and television, exploring dance, drama, performance, music and visual art.¹¹ The Workshop's weekly videoart broadcast, *Artists Showcase*, was the longest continuous artists' television series when it ended in 1982, and brought widespread attention to WGBH. A high point for the Workshop was the 1974 landmark production *Video: The New Wave*,¹² the first national PBS broadcast of video art. Written and narrated by Brian O'Doherty (who was also the director of the NEA's media arts program), it served as a retrospective for achievements in the field.

In New York, video production and broadcast got a boost when the TV Laboratory was established at WNET public television in 1972. At that time access to any kind of editing equipment was very limited in the city. Headed by David Loxton, WNET's Lab was inspired by the work going on at WGBH, and shared ideas, funds and equipment with its Boston counterpart. As Fred Barzyk recalled, "We shared a lot of times, we even sent whatever cash we had to the Laboratory so that [David Loxton] could do things we weren't allowed to do, and vice versa. There were a lot of times when we collaborated on shows, probably the most disastrous one was something called *Collisions* (1976) with Lily Tomlin, Danny Ackroyd, Gilda Radner, and Professor Irwin Corey."¹³

Loxton established direct working relationships with recognized video artists who, up until that time had little access to sophisticated editing and other broadcast quality equipment. Once selected to be part of the TV Lab, the artists were given access to WNET's broadcast editing systems, which utilized the newest technology available to public television at the time. While many artists had some experience with three-quarter-inch editing, they were now allowed to work with state-of-the-art two-inch technology under the direction of station technicians and producers. Because of union regulations and other restrictions, artists were not permitted to operate the equipment directly. Bill Viola says, about WNET's TV Lab, "It was a place where I grew up in video. When you were accepted into the program, you made a quantum leap in terms of what was possible."¹⁴ A TV Lab residency was prestigious and usually led at least to a local broadcast of the finished work.

Artists who were selected during the Lab's ten-year history formed a who's who of New York video artists of that decade. In the words of one of its producers, Carol Brandenberg, the Lab ". . . nurtured many of the most talented independent film and videomakers working. . . ."¹⁵ Even though the roster included many documentary makers, it excluded artists airing minority viewpoints and others who didn't fit into the stylistic and conceptual frame-

work demanded by the producers. Brandenberg was instrumental in maintaining strong funding during the early years, but crucial New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) support dwindled in 1982. NYSCA artist peer panels were concerned about the high overhead required by WNET, the method of selecting participants, and the fact that WNET had not increased station support to the Lab. When the confrontation between the organizations hit an impasse, WNET issued an immediate notice to all former participants of the TV Lab to collect their master tapes, and then closed the project. Many of the original two-inch masters are now housed in the video archives of the Museum of Modern Art.

The 1970s saw the greatest funding support for artists' residencies in public television and the most flexible years in public television's art programming history. Yet despite the remarkable output of new work during this time, relations among donors, artists, and station bureaucrats were not smooth. Although the NEA and NYSCA had established program funds for video production support, and along with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Rockefeller Foundation support, artists expected continued expansion of television access. Instead, conflicts arose between artists and arts television producers, and expectations that once soared became confused. Lured by the illusion of vast amounts of funding and technical support that public television had become known to provide, more artists sought entry into the workshop programs than could be accommodated. Program support diminished across the board by the late 1970s, and grants made to WGBH for artists' programs, for example, did not even provide enough operating support for a full-time director. Public television began to feel the pressure from tightening dollars. Complicating this situation further was the fact that in order to obtain private sector funds for more mainstream programs, public television was forced to compete with commercial television for larger audiences, financial supporters, and wealthy subscribers. Their strategy, by definition, excluded most programs that were controversial or difficult. Public TV became geared to the specialized, over-50-years-old and educated home audience, and rationalized demands from women's groups and minority artists who perceived themselves as being excluded from its programming.

Responding to the conservative "home grown" nature of public television's program policy, a special international closed conference of artists and television producers was hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation at Lake Como, Italy in May 1977. The conference, suggested by Italian television's Sergio Borelli, was inspired by several European conferences called CIRCOM. Out of this watershed meeting came the International Public Television screening conference, INPUT, established as an annual forum at which creative producers from around the world could discuss quality non-commercial television programming. INPUT provided the first opportunity for American public TV

producers to compare their productions with their European counterparts who were not embroiled in competition with commercial TV and its point of view. Although Europe was considered a vast market for American programs (and a source of station funding), public broadcasting stations rarely programmed foreign language productions (and were adverse to subtitles). The mission of INPUT was to bring public television producers together as visionaries and potential collaborators, and video artists and independent filmmakers were asked to participate in this process.¹⁶ Hosted by a different country each year, INPUT continues to provide one of the few opportunities where artists, broadcasters, and independent producers can discuss program content.

As foundation and federal funds to public television for experimental works decreased during the 1970s, the financial support for artists grew. A new era in funding had started when the NEA began supporting a small (but reported to be growing) number of not-for-profit media art centers. Anticipating the shift in funding, media art centers were created in desperation by artists who wanted access to equipment and did not qualify, or who would not accept the conditions imposed on artists by TV stations producers. These centers ultimately provided equipment and a showcase for artists that was more democratic than the selection process utilized by television stations. As needs arose, the new non-profit organizations gained access to digital state-of-the-art equipment—which was becoming available at more affordable rates—through commercial facilities. By contrast, the public television stations, which had invested heavily in equipment at the beginning of the 1970s, could not afford to keep up with technical developments that included advanced digital effects, computer animation and paint box graphics, and other specialized equipment that commercial video editing studios offered in the early 1980s.

As Rockefeller Foundation funding became diverted directly to artists, to research in the field of media arts, and to regional media art center facilities, artists' television projects received less fiscal support. The funders who established the initial experimental television art programs had hoped that individual stations would pursue funding sources within the PBS system to perpetuate, and expand, their seed money. Some media art centers, like the Bay Area Video Coalition in San Francisco and the Long Beach Museum's LBMA VIDEO, became technically sophisticated in the 1980s with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the NEA. In fact, many media art centers surpassed public television in offering artists both advanced equipment and unrestricted freedom. Access to products such as three-quarter-inch broadcast-quality portable color cameras, time-coded editing, and frame-accurate edit controllers, attracted artists drawn to the alternative environment, and who, with and without the support of funding agencies, created videotapes that expressed varied points of view and aesthetic approaches. Little of this work found its way to television; instead it was exhibited in alternative and artist-

run spaces as well as in a few museum exhibition programs. These venues, and not public television, remain the main vehicle for showing video art today. As John Reilly wisely surmised in 1979: "The field of media centers is organic and responds to changing needs and emerging talent. This structure is not the creation of a single bureaucracy in Washington, New York, or wherever. It is diverse and evolves as needs and talents emerge."¹⁷

The 1980s: Commercial and Creative Forces Seek Common Ground

In the mid-1980s, three public television program series were developed to broadcast video art across the country: *Alive From Off Center*, the nation's PBS-supported dance/performance/ video series, first aired in Summer 1985; *New Television*, which began as an acquisition program at WNET, New York in 1985, and was joined by WGBH as a co-producer in 1987; and The Learning Channel's independent national cable series, *The Independents*, also established in 1985. Several of *The Independents*' thirteen-week thematic program series, which negotiated PBS carriage in its fourth year, often mix documentary, film, and video art in the same one-hour program. Direct grants to each of the producing stations were made by the Rockefeller Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various NEA program funds and state art councils. Public television used the grants to pay program costs for acquisition and production of artists' work, and were mandated by federal and state agencies to encourage alternative and minority artist participation.

The most influential of the series, *Alive From Off Center*, began as a collaboration with Minneapolis's public television station KTCA and the Walker Art Center to produce an eight-week series of half-hour programs featuring contemporary dance, performance, and video art. With initial major support from the NEA's dance program and from the Rockefeller Foundation, *Alive's* ambitious plans called for the production of a series suitable for national broadcast. It was the first time funding agencies and producers combined efforts to target the national audience for contemporary performance (and to a lesser extent, video art), and they were determined to make the program what the program's first executive producer, Melinda Ward, often called "good television," rather than good art. The series, which promised the largest audience yet in the United States for artists, also hoped to make inroads into the yet untapped, younger (under fifty) audience for PBS. The first season's broadcast of *Alive From Off Center* elicited double-edged criticism. Although public television stations in most metropolitan cities carried *Alive*, programmers elsewhere were not impressed by a series designed for a young, upscale audience and found that the coded images in the arts programs didn't appeal to their mid-American taste. Meanwhile, art critics found the programs to be ". . . the sil-

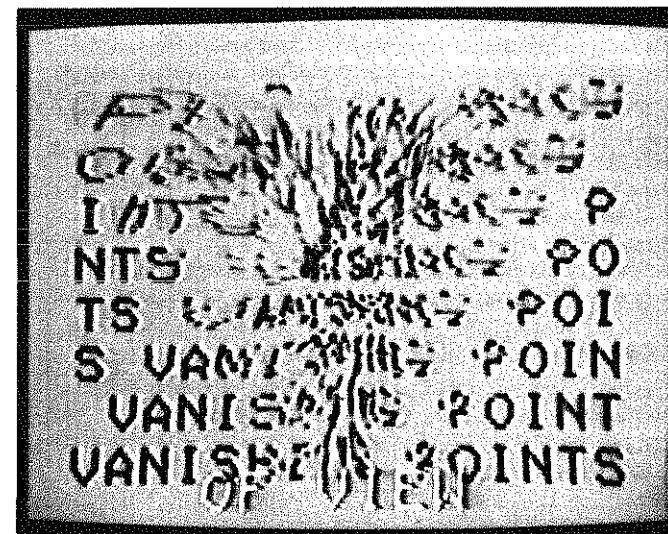
liest mix of art and commerce, confusing, in the American way . . . an expensive look with no real substance that can't decide if they should entertain or ennoble and try to do both with the patented PBS schoolmarmish didacticism."¹⁸

Even with its innovative program history, WGBH's New Television Workshop, headed by Susan Dowling since 1979, found the 1980s a difficult time for fundraising, and foresaw a dismal future. In response to this, and after two years of planning, in 1983 WGBH and The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Boston, formed a joint production project to reinvigorate the New Television Workshop and introduce television programming and production at The ICA. With initial funding for three years from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities' special New Works Development Award, The Contemporary Art Television (CAT) Fund was established. The CAT Fund was designed to provide artists much-needed production funding support within the broad context of public television, and to find innovative methods to professionalize the international distribution of video works, especially to television, in order to eventually build a self-sustaining operation. Managed by this author in a newly conceived position as curator/producer, The CAT Fund was directed jointly by Susan Dowling and David Ross, director of The ICA since 1981. The co-venture was an effort to combine support structures from both the TV and museum worlds, with the blessing and full support from both institutions. Although controversial because it was perceived as a grant-giving agency, The CAT Fund co-produced and assisted in arranging broadcast for productions by an international group of artists. But, unlike the artists' television series which began during this period, The CAT Fund ultimately suffered from the lack of development support from its parent institutions, and a major funding source for the project did not materialize. Released from its broadcast partner, The Fund became an ICA program that could explore a variety of directions in video including broadcast, installation, performance, and single-channel works inappropriate for television. WGBH's New Television Workshop, in the meantime, began a successful collaboration with WNET to co-produce the artists series *New Television*.

In 1989 federal legislation established the creation of an Independent Programming Service separate from PBS and CPB with the stated purpose of guaranteeing new funding for independent producers working outside the established public television system. This bold plan promises that public television will contain more artists' work, alternative documentary formats, minority voices, and other non-traditional programming. Lawrence Sapadin, co-chair of the media community's National Coalition and executive director of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, hailed the plan as "a victory for the American public, who will now be able to see on television the most diverse and innovative programming."¹⁹ Given the history of video art on tele-

sion from the late 1960s to the present, it is clear that the Independent Programming Service will face major challenges as it strives to meet its goals. Even when this plan succeeds in creating more television that is nontraditional, the fact remains that the future of televised video art will be problematic. Spurred by its commercial need to garner the greatest possible audience, TV programming is still geared toward the greatest common denominator. Funders and program directors will continue to select programs that can not only deliver their "product" or reflect their "message" but also "deliver" an audience.

Television, the vast consumer of programming aimed at an ambiguous "mass audience," was conceived for consumption by the largest possible common denominator audience. TV remains the single most important reference point for determining uniformity in American culture. The question remains how, today, with TV a cultural constant and a social fact, can artists as individuals influence this unsympathetic system? Because art and television remain at philosophical odds with each other's perspectives, the value is often in the discourse rather than in the work. Ultimately then, the issue is less about the individual program on television and more about the complex discourse that arises when aesthetic aspirations come in head-on contact with consumer practices, blurring the boundaries between art and entertainment. Experimentation and art influenced public television during the 1960s. The challenge for video artists will be to expand the definition of their art and cultural assumptions in order to keep alive this rich discourse of parallel alternatives and individual voices.



Gary Hill, *Happenstance* (part one of many parts), 1982-83.

And if the Right Hand did not know What the Left Hand is doing

Yes, this is it, perhaps only slightly different from when others passed through. Perhaps not, the difference only being my time and theirs. Nothing seems to have ever been moved. There is something of every description that can only be a trap. Maybe it all moves proportionately thereby canceling out change and the estrangement of judgement. No, an other order pervades. It's happening all at once; I'm just a disturbance wrapped up in myself trying to pass through the gate of a great halfway house.

Video Art: Theory and Practice (that bulge of nouns, perhaps more honest if bolted with quotes; as if certain words can't have closed mouths, part they must, from whence whatever language they still bear begins to seep). But that was only a working title for this book. And What is it now? No matter, for if we repeat any number of words over and over again they too will empty themselves in equally hideous fashion. "[Other] words to avoid because of their excessive theoretical freight: 'signifier,' 'symbol-